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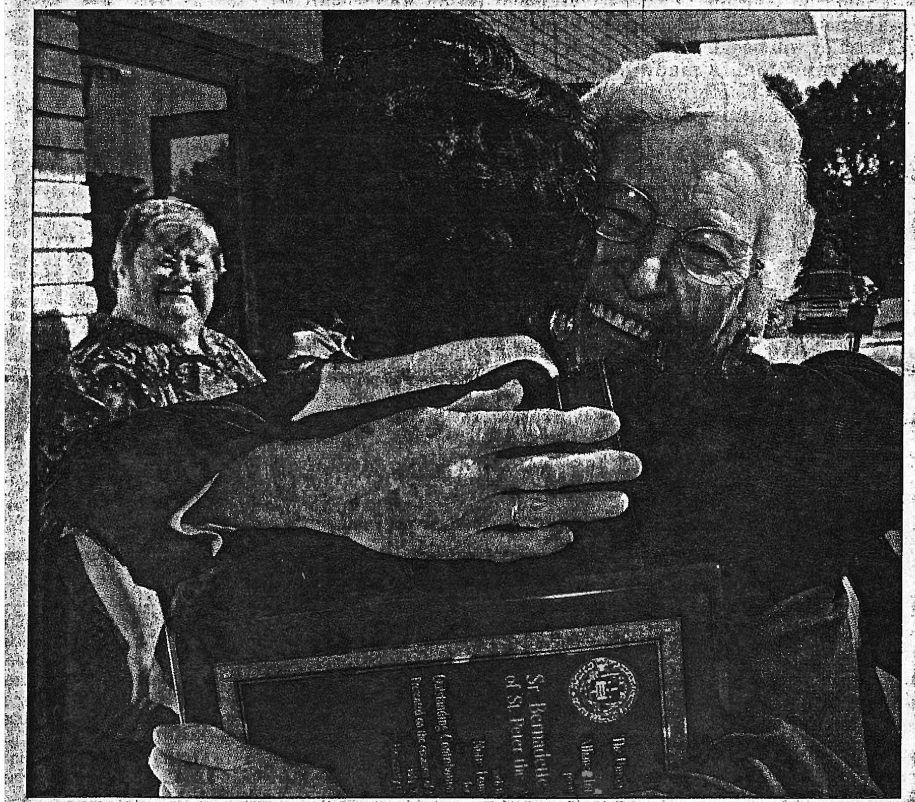
Sept. 17, 2003

# A 'FAMILY' AFFAIR



Staff Photo/William Colgin

Bernadette McNamara, principal of St. Peter the Apostle Catholic School in Pascagoula, gets a hug from Therisa Ducksworth as Elizabeth Benefield looks on. Tuesday morning, McNamara was presented with the Notre Dame Award for Outstanding Contributions to Catholic Education from the University of Notre Dame and the Alliance for Catholic Education.

## *Sister Bernadette McNamara honored for contributions to Catholic education*

By DEBBIE ANGLIN
Mississippi Press Staff

PASCAGOULA — All three of Sister Bernadette McNamara's "families" were at St. Peter the Apostle Catholic Church Tuesday to help the principal celebrate her recognition for outstanding contributions to Catholic education.

Bishop Thomas J. Rodi of the Catholic Diocese of Biloxi and Sister Veronica Cahill, Superior of the Sisters of the Holy Spirit of San Antonio, Texas, presented Sister McNamara with the "Notre Dame Award" given by the University of Notre Dame and the Alliance for Catholic Education.

McNamara's three "families" included four of her siblings, Sister Cahill from McNamara's religious order, and her church and school family at St. Peter's.

The award was actually presented this summer during the 10-year celebration of the ACE program at the University of Notre Dame. McNamara was unable to attend the celebration because of a prior commitment in Ireland. In her absence, the Sisters of the Holy Spirit sent Sister Mary Fagan to receive the award. On Tuesday, a beaming Sister McNamara received the plaque to a standing ovation at the church, followed by a reception in the school gym in her honor.

"One of the best things that could have been done for this school was to allow these ACE teachers to come here and be a part of our world," Sister McNamara said.

But the humble nun, who has served as St. Peter's

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Staff Photo/William Colgin

Sister Veronica Cahill, Superior of Sisters of the Holy Spirit of San Antonio, Texas, left, and Bishop Thomas J. Rodi of the Catholic Diocese of Biloxi, right, present Sister Bernadette McNamara, principal of St. Peter the Apostle Catholic School in Pascagoula, with the Notre Dame Award for Outstanding Contributions to Catholic Education from the University of Notre Dame and the Alliance for Catholic Education.

# McNamara

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principal for the past eight years, said she could not accept the award for herself.

"I accept it for everybody here," she said. "I can't do what I do without the support of all the teachers, staff and parents in this parish and this school. We are one big family and we work together. I love all of you very much."

The feeling is mutual.

As Bishop Rodi stood at the altar for the celebration, he said he could look across the street to a scene quite different from what was happening inside the church.

"I looked out and saw a sea of smiling faces and I could also see the inmates at the Adult Detention Center," he said. "I wondered how different their lives might have been if Sister Bernadette had been a part of their lives when they were younger."

One of 13 siblings, Sister McNamara's brothers and sisters know how much their lives have been enriched because of their sister.

"She's the glue that holds us all together," said her sister, Philomena Gunning of Sarasota, Fla.

"We are all scattered and she is the reason we get together so often for things like baptisms and weddings," said sister Patricia Conway of Chicago, Ill.

Sister McNamara is also the "glue" of St. Peter's School.

"When we get into trouble, she doesn't send us home," said student Jeramy Anderson. "She talks to us first and then says she is going to pray for us."

Sixth-grader Corey Lodgins said Sister McNamara is loving and peaceful. "She keeps us in line. She heard me sing and gave me the chance to sing more."

Fifth-grader Royce Rollins said Sister Bernadette is an "excellent principal.

"She encourages us and loves us," he said.

His mother, Mary, said the principal is a joy to know. "She is the most wonderful, inspiring person I have ever met. She is a principal and a mentor all at the same time," she said.

With four children who have come through the doors of St. Peter's, Eleanor Douglas said Sister Bernadette has taught her family many lessons of life.

"She is a magnificent person, one of the elite sisters. She believes in educating our children," she said. "And when it comes to being a leader, she takes it one step farther. We love her."

For the past four years, St. Peter's has welcomed ACE teachers to the schools. These are graduate students who are earning their master's degrees while donating two years of teaching at Catholic schools throughout the country. In the summer, they return to the University of Notre Dame for summer classes.

Courtney Mercer of Herndon, Va., is in her second year at St. Peter's as an ACE teacher.

"Sister Bernadette is an amazing person," Mercer said. "She has helped me so much and been so extremely supportive. There's no way of predicting what it's going to be like when you come to a tiny school in the South. It has been a completely different environment for me and an absolutely wonderful experience. There are lots of hugs and smiles and I love what I do."

First-year ACE teacher Saoirse Rooney is a long way from her home in Dublin, Ireland and has found a fellow Irishwoman in Sister McNamara.

"Sister Bernadette has made me feel so at home here. She is so loving and supportive. I have a fabulous class of second-graders and great support from the parents. It's a wonderful family atmosphere," she said.

Sister McNamara, 69, said working with the children has been one of the greatest rewards of her life.

"When I look at those children who are coming in her as 3-year-olds and leaving as sixth-graders I know we don't have to worry about them," she said. "They have received a quality Christian Catholic education. We have to know where we come from and where we are going because this gives life meaning. God made us to know him, to serve him and most of all to love him. How can we love him and serve him if we don't know him? It's our responsibility to help these children become the people God wants them to be."

Fellow principal Elizabeth Benefield, of Resurrection Catholic Elementary School, said Sister McNamara provides her with continuing encouragement and support.

"She is a model of faith and has a love that is boundless. She is a constant source of inspiration to us all."

*Debbie Anglin can be reached at 934-1448 or danglin@themississippipress.com.*